

**FACING A NEW REALITY: THE OPPORTUNITIES AND  
CHALLENGES OF LAW LIBRARIANS IN MALAYSIA**

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**ABSTRACT**

*Law firms worldwide have undergone dramatic changes and developments throughout the years. This article looks at the issues that currently exist in Malaysian law libraries. It outlines the qualifications required in order to be a good law librarian and discusses the future role of law librarians in this country.*

**Keywords:** Law libraries; Law librarians; Malaysia

**NEW TRENDS AND DEVELOPMENT IN THE LEGAL INDUSTRY**

In the past twenty years, law firms have undergone dramatic changes and developments. Among these are the increasingly complex laws, the expansion of law firms and specialized practices and the general emphasis of firms more as businesses, with revenue, overhead and efficiency concerns. The evolution of the practice of law and client demands have resulted in rapid changes and it has become evident that firms need to better manage the intellectual capital within their organizations.

The legal market has had to reassess the way practice is being defined as a business. Working in a global marketplace, firms must compete in a fast-paced environment wherein clients expect to communicate through electronic networks around the world. In order to stay competitive, firms have had to adopt knowledge management and business techniques that make use of the Internet and other information technology in order to market their services in terms of specialized legal knowledge. In addition, rapid changes in information technology also continue to alter the way in which information is published, accessed, organized and disseminated.

These changes naturally have an impact on library resources within such organisations. This in turn forces library resource professionals to re-evaluate their role in this process as such developments have altered the practice of law

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and transformed the jobs of librarians in law firms around the globe, including Malaysia.

Have the job requirements for law library positions changed, and if so, what trends have developed with regard to the types of knowledge, skills, and experience required for such jobs? Is there still a need for a librarian to manage a library, as much legal material is now available electronically and lawyers are increasingly doing more of their research work at their own desktops?

Many questions arise in hiring a professional law librarian. For instance, how does one know if the time is right for the firm to consider hiring one? Also, how does one find the right person for the job? And once the candidate is identified, how does one utilize his or her skills most effectively? In deciding whether or not a professional librarian might be right for a firm, the evaluation should not be based solely on the firm's size, but should focus on the value that could be added by someone with professional research and management skills.

Managing a law firm's library today requires many skill sets which are sometimes difficult to locate in a limited pool of specialized candidates, be it from technical services to reference expertise, from teaching and training skills to technology planning and implementation. Unfortunately, as the demand for a librarian's expertise continues to grow, especially within the private law firm environment, the number of qualified professional law librarians is shrinking. In many instances, the career path of librarians who take these jobs plateau within their firm, leaving no room for advancement, thus raising job satisfaction issues.

The challenge in today's Malaysian legal market is to attract and retain qualified people from the library profession. Many professionals are unable to sustain their interest in this sector of the profession due to more lucrative offers in other sectors. Many feel ill-equipped with the appropriate skills, knowledge and experience for the demands of the job. Loss of interest due to these reasons is common, and many in the profession view the situation as temporary, in some cases due to remuneration that does not commensurate with experience, workload and skill sets. Hence the market is now experiencing an acute shortage of librarians and in many cases, firms are forced to hire unqualified persons.



## **THE CHALLENGE AHEAD - WHAT QUALIFICATIONS ARE NEEDED?**

It is difficult to categorize who qualify as law librarian since there are no qualifications or special training offered by tertiary institutions in Malaysia for someone interested in this profession. This poses a serious challenge to the profession, and institutions offering Library and Information Science education to meet the current demands and needs of the market for competent and able professionals to service this sector. Information professionals such as law librarians constantly need to be well informed and current in their legal knowledge in order to assist the lawyers effectively. Many library graduates in Malaysia lack specialized knowledge in law or expertise in legal information management and therefore might feel inadequate and ill-equipped to undertake such a role. In contrast, there is already a trend in countries such as England, Australia and America requiring dual qualifications in law and librarianship, before one could be considered for a permanent position as a law librarian.

It is important for the law librarian to have an understanding or knowledge of the law since his/her essential role is to teach users how to locate or use sources for legal research. For a law librarian to properly support the needs of the organization, he/she must have a good educational background with specialized knowledge in legal information. The challenge to all the tertiary institutions in Malaysia offering library and information studies is to rethink their curriculum, as there is currently no law librarianship course being offered.

It is obvious that law librarians in Malaysia undertake their role as law librarians without any formal training in law librarianship but mainly on a trial and error basis. This may be untenable in the long term, and does not promote a good image of the profession. Law librarians are specialists in their field and the general impression is that they must have training beyond a library degree. Formalised law library education can better train potential law librarians with the necessary skills and knowledge to ensure better and more competent professionals. The legal market needs to address the following issues quickly and seriously in order overcome the shortage of law librarians in Malaysia:

- Reconsider commensurating remuneration in order to attract more qualified people to venture into this sector of librarianship.
- Give due recognition to this profession by hiring properly qualified personnel for such positions.

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- Support and encourage professional development among law librarians in order to enhance professionalism and quality of librarianship.

Proactive steps that could be taken by law librarians include:

- Devoting substantial efforts towards continuing education, including, familiarizing themselves with legal resources, legal subjects, legal systems and legal profession on an ongoing basis so as to be able to serve their clients better.
- Organising discussions, workshops and training sessions through joint efforts of the Librarians Association of Malaysia and the Malaysian Bar Council to create awareness among librarians on the opportunities and challenges library professionals face in the present market.
- Creating awareness among library students of the opportunities available in this sector particularly through the library and information science departments in the universities and the Librarians Association of Malaysia, including offering them an optional paper for law librarianship in the current syllabus.
- Adopting an interdisciplinary approach between the law faculties and the library and information science departments to introduce qualifications for law librarians.
- Organizing a network of law librarians for the purpose of sharing professional experience and awareness of their roles and job requirements and to identify areas for improvement in skills and knowledge in order to be competent and efficient for the job.

Some law firms in Malaysia have already recognized a Master's degree in Library and Information Science as a prerequisite for the position of a law librarian. However, in academic and bar libraries, a law degree may be required. A library degree, combined with a law degree, does not automatically ensure a competent law librarian. As there is no formal training to prepare adequately for the position, a good law librarian's competency would largely depend on his/her mental conditioning and attitude. An ideal candidate is one who has garnered a fair amount of experience, including ample exposure to a good role model in a proper setting.

A librarian, who is formally trained and has sufficient experience, can perform many professional functions efficiently. Although legal knowledge is essential,



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law librarians do not necessarily read every case or report that they gather, but it is sufficient that they are familiar with the legal system and legal resources. Librarians do not need to know the substance of the law, but they must keep abreast with all new publications. Like money, information has time value. By monitoring the current literature and alerting relevant items to the correct persons, librarians can provide new information that could potentially assist to win a case or to gain a client.

A Malaysian law librarian must choose appropriate legal-related knowledge, skills and attitudes in order to become competent and ready to undertake the role. They include knowledge of:

- the Malaysian legal system and legal resources
- legal terminology and citation system
- legal literature
- ethics of the legal profession and that of librarianship

## **THE FUTURE ROLE OF MALAYSIAN LAW LIBRARIANS**

In Malaysia, the majority of law librarians are not trained to execute their tasks fully. They are mostly hired for generic work, largely non-professional in nature such as purchasing of books, updating of statutes, arranging of books and locating them for users. In addition, these tasks are not billable and they are clerical in nature. Hence it is sometimes difficult for an employer to justify hiring a professional or qualified law librarian, who only performs clerical duties in the library. It may be that these firms do not yet comprehend the value and services of a professional librarian. Today's law librarian, especially one working in the law firm setting, is a hybrid of researcher, organizer, networker and cost-saver, making him /her a multi-disciplined worker. The law firm librarian's role also includes supporting the firm's staff and lawyers by providing optimum library services for the firm through various professional duties relating to the organization and distribution of legal information. Malaysian law librarians should be trained to undertake various roles to fit the current demands of the global legal industry. These roles are:

Role # 1 as ***Knowledge and Information Manager*** – As knowledge-based organisations, law firms need to organise all their intellectual capital in order to

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be competitive. The law librarian is trained to do this as he understands better the taxonomy principles of classification and indexing internally- and externally-generated knowledge to support an excellent legal practice.

Role # 2 as ***Teacher and Trainer*** – The librarian is the only employee of a law firm who, as part of his/her professional responsibilities, teaches and trains both staff and lawyers in the use of legal information resources. It is logical therefore for the librarian, who constantly keeps abreast with the changes in electronic resources, to be the in-house trainer for his/her organization.

Role # 3 as ***Researcher and Business Intelligence Agent*** – As an expert researcher, the librarian can add value and reduce costs not by researching and addressing points of law – which is the purview of the lawyer – but by clarifying points of fact. Utilizing their knowledge of reference resources, of the kind not commonly known or used by lawyers per se, a law librarian can be a firm's super sleuth and fact-checker.

Role # 4 as ***Strategic Planner*** – Credible legal information is crucial to a law firm's ability to serve its clients well and distinguish itself from the competitors. The librarian can help the firm to access the information it needs to make informed decisions about the future, including information about the legal marketplace, the industries served, merging practice areas and potential clients.

Role # 5 as ***Client Relation and Marketing Manager*** – The librarian can act as a point of contact for enquiries from staff, lawyers and clients within and outside the Firm. He/she should be involved in coordinating majority of the firm's publications, client relation management and other marketing information such as lawyers' profiles, firm's website, directory listings and advertisements.

The dearth of articles discussing the role of law librarians in Malaysia has resulted in low awareness among those who are in a position to employ law librarians. The sad reality is that many do not understand the job scope of a law librarian when it is to their advantage if lawyers use the services of the law librarians to assist in their practice.

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